

#8 TIPS FOR LOCAL HEALTH DEPARTMENTS

What Local Health Departments Can Do to Support Interagency Collaboration to Improve Academic and Health Outcomes

Local health departments aim to protect and improve the health status and well-being of all individuals, including the community's children and youth. By collaborating with local education agencies, local health departments can reach the approximately 53 million young people in the United States, or more than 95% of all young people aged 5 to 17 years who attend the nation's 96,000 elementary and secondary schools, as well as the students' families and the schools' employees. Working with schools to promote the health and safety of students, families, and staff is an efficient and cost-effective public health strategy.

Local health departments can play a variety of roles. In districts that do not have well-developed school health programs, the health department can advocate for and promote awareness of the importance of addressing health concerns to promote learning and can act to effect change by offering technical assistance to introduce new approaches. The health department can partner with education and other community agencies to leverage and share resources and to identify new ones. Partnerships between health departments and local education agencies to address the well-being of young people help both agencies fulfill their missions—the health department to promote the health of the community and the local education agency to ensure that students benefit from their educational opportunities. In the school setting, students learn lessons and receive services that can foster their current health and success in school, prevent behaviors that can cause serious health and social problems in later years, and contribute to their well-being and productivity as adults. To develop and maintain effective interagency collaboration that supports the health and learning of students, local health departments can:

- **Increase their knowledge of education issues.** Learn about the primary concerns of educators. Be prepared to demonstrate that you understand the challenges that educators face. Gather data that show how health and learning affect each other. See “Making the Connection: Health and Student Achievement,” a PowerPoint® presentation developed by the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials and the Society of State Directors of Health, Physical Education and Recreation which documents research linking learning and health outcomes (available at <http://www.thesociety.org> and http://www.astho.org/?template=adolescent_school_health.html).
- **Communicate with local education agencies or schools in their city or county.** Demonstrate a willingness to collaborate. Point out that the welfare of students can be a shared responsibility. Local educators may not be aware of the potential that collaboration with the health department can offer. Sit down with the school or district administrator or the health coordinator to find out what the schools' concerns are and identify ways that the health department might assist. At the same time, inform the school or district about health department resources of which the school might not be aware. Point out areas of common concern, such as safety and injury prevention, confidentiality, immunization, HIV/AIDS, or children with special health care needs. Discuss the potential of continuing communication that might evolve into collaborative activities.

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- **Develop a plan.** Planning requires agreement about shared visions, missions, goals, and objectives; a timeline that details when objectives will be achieved; and clear delineation of responsibility. Ensure that all participants share an understanding of and have an equal stake in the process.
- **Develop the capacity to provide education, training, and services to students, staff, and families.** Learn about the coordinated school health program model and other approaches to collaboration that have been used by health and education agencies across the country. Review the literature, visit websites, attend conferences, and make connections with other agencies that are participating in collaborative activities. Learn more about the school district's needs and aspirations, and then work with administration and staff to identify strategies to address them. The local health department may already have resources to perform identified activities. However, as the relationship evolves, the local health department most likely will want to increase its capacity to provide education and training to address the health-related concerns. Develop job descriptions and commit staff to initiating and cultivating partnerships with schools.
- **Use technical assistance and funding to support schools' efforts to address education and health outcomes.** Sometimes helping a district introduce an HIV prevention education curriculum or establish a staff wellness program provides a basis for collaboration. In some districts, the health department assumes a major role in the supervision or provision of health services. In other communities, health departments partner with districts to develop school health programs by providing training and technical assistance and identifying funding sources. Sometimes a health department has access to funding sources that are not directly available to the schools. Joint applications for funding can be a strong incentive for collaboration.
- **Assist with gathering and interpreting data.** Assessment is one of the core functions of public health services. Provide assistance with needs assessments that can identify supports and deficits in both the health and education sectors. Work with the district to develop assessment measures for health and education status and outcomes.
- **Schedule regular meetings between health and education agency leadership.** Regular meetings provide a forum for ongoing discussion of common concerns and lay the foundation for the collaboration's continuation, particularly in the event of staff change. Participation by agency leaders demonstrates to staff that improving learning and health outcomes is a priority for both agencies. Staff and administration need to communicate regularly to ensure that the implementation of activities is in keeping with the leadership's vision and that leadership is aware of the daily realities staff members encounter in the field.
- **Join with the local education agency and other community organizations to publicize and celebrate accomplishments.** Publicizing and celebrating successes can increase visibility and entice others to join the collaboration. Planning with local educators (and others committed to student and family welfare) a joyous public event to celebrate a project's successful completion or the attainment of an anticipated milestone can revitalize and cement collaborative relationships.